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SUBJECT: BAD MINISTER: PRESIDENT PUBLICLY SCOLDS COALITION PARTNER

11. (U) SUMMARY. Over the weekend of May 17, President Ronald Venetiaan publicly scolded Minister of Physical Planning, Land, and Forest Management Michael Jong Tjien Fa for mixing party politics with government business when he attempted to give out land deeds at a party function. Venetiaan and Jong Tjien Fa come from different parties within the governing coalition, and tensions rose. Although Venetiaan's action could be interpreted as a step to fight corruption, most likely the President's move is political, with an eye toward achieving distance between coalition parties before the 2010 elections. SUMMARY

Land Deeds as Political Capital... but Whose?

12. (U) Minister of Planning, Land, and Forest Management Michael Jong Tjien Fa and Speaker of the National Assembly Paul Somohardjo planned to give out land titles to poor farmers in Suriname's Nickerie district during a May 18 event sponsored by their political party, Pertjaja Luhur. President Venetiaan had previously warned Jong Tjien Fa not to mix party politics with government business. Moreover, the ruling coalition had already agreed that these documents, which effectively gave title to land free-of-charge, would be handed to the farmers at a meeting hosted jointly by several government ministers that same day in Nickerie. In the end Jong Tjien Fa, chastened, told the farmers that he did not have the official documents with him. The handing-over ceremony at the party event was called off and the farmers were told that they had to go to Paramaribo to receive their land titles.

Another Kind of Political Capital: Bashing Pertjaja Luhur

13. (U) On May 19, President Venetiaan, with Minister Jong Tjien Fa standing next to him, publicly scolded the Minister for plans to combine government and party business, told the press "this is the last straw" and that Jong Tjien Fa "has to make sure that nothing else happens, otherwise he will be fired." Carmelita Ferreira, a party colleague of Venetiaan, said publicly the President should have fired Jong Tjien Fa immediately for his disrespectful behavior. Guno Castelen, coalition member from a third party, relayed to Embassy staff that "this is undoubtedly one of the tricks of Pertjaja Luhur." Castelen noted that the election campaign has already started for Pertjaja Luhur, and they will do anything to get seats in districts where they do not yet have a foothold (including Nickerie).

Not Sorry: Somohardjo explains, Hering complains

14. (U) While Somohardjo initially said the incident "was all a big misunderstanding," and Jong Tjien Fa did "not intend to disrespect the President," his spokesman, Geor Hering, released an angry

statement to the press on May 23. The statement read, he "does not understand why the Pertjaja Luhur is always accused of corrupt practices by its coalition partners and the opposition" and that the party will "no longer accept all these accusations." Hering said the party will convene a high-level meeting within two weeks to discuss the issue.

15. (SBU) COMMENT. A patronage spoils system is the hallmark of Surinamese politics and, at best, Pertjaja Luhur's well-known land-title shenanigans are a particularly blatant example of their use. At worst, Pertjaja Luhur is, as most Surinamers assert and anecdotal evidence suggests, actively corrupt. While it is tempting to see Venetiaan's actions as a step to fight corruption, the timing of his action indicates he is also playing party politics. The National Party of Suriname, Venetiaan's party, needs to distance itself from Pertjaja Luhur before the 2010 election cycle in order to fend off voter claims that it is powerless to control renegade coalition partners. Regardless of the President's comments, the coalition will go on. An outright coalition break would put an end to all of President Venetiaan's power - and all of Pertjaja Luhur's patronage opportunities. They continue to need each other. END COMMENT.

SCHREIBER HUGHES